

REBELS WITH
A CAUSE

AUTOMATION OR
AUTOMATON

MARKETING'S
IDENTITY CRISIS

CAN ETAIL SAVE
RETAIL?

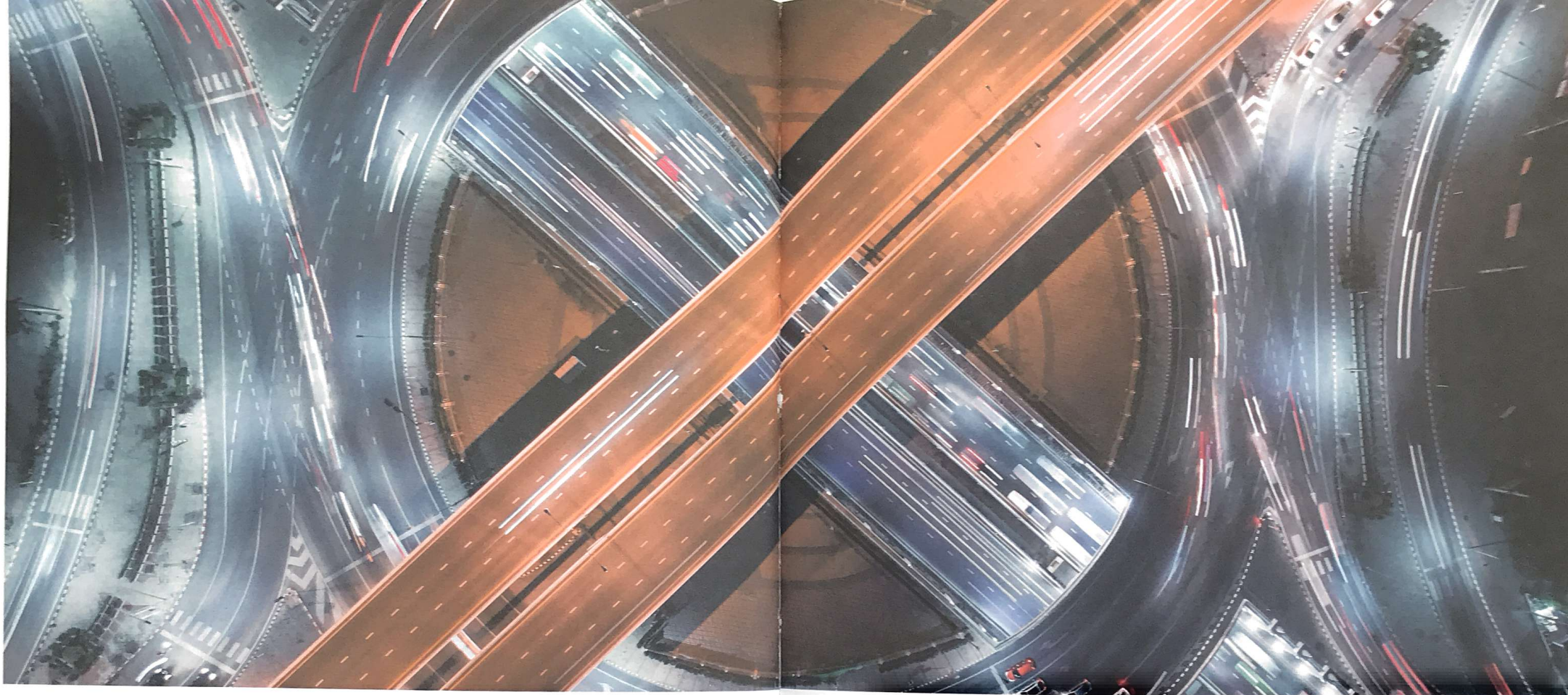
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MARKETING'S CROSSROADS

Time to redefine marketing – and marketers – for a new age

Words MORAG CUDDEFORD-JONES

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There can be no doubt that the senior marketer's role is changing as organisations pivot towards the digital space, compete with challenger brands or simply become more data-driven. But as transformation accelerates, are marketers too quick to jump on the latest bandwagon? Could it be that senior leadership is setting too much store in technology-led talents, when they should be drilling back into the foundations that traditionally made marketers strategic brand stewards? At CIM's Big Conversation roundtable in October 2018, senior marketers, consultants and academics debated whether the discipline is losing its way and what, if anything, can set it back on track.

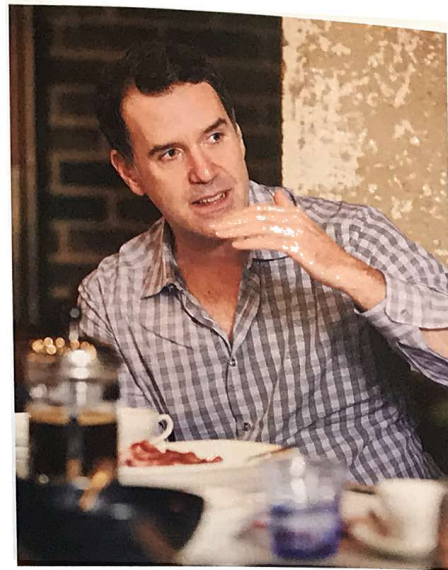
Inside...

- ◆ Marketing may be **losing its direction**, to the detriment of brands' strategic focus
- ◆ But, the core of the modern senior marketer should essentially remain **unchanged**
- ◆ An obsession over **rebranding** marketing is unhelpful and potentially damaging to the role
- ◆ **Redefine** – not rebrand – and retrench to move marketing forward with purpose

FITTING THE DESCRIPTION

With so much change on the table, it can be hard to focus on the fundamental realities of the senior marketer's role. The subject of much debate was agreed that the role – whatever the title includes chief, director or head – comes down to being an advocate of marketing activity to company leadership, and a source of expertise in direction to junior staff.

The problem, attendees revealed, was that the distractions of digital, and too much focus on execution rather than strategy, were hindering senior marketers' ability to do this. "I recognise the pressure on the senior marketer to be across [a range of disciplines]. Our role is to filter, to challenge and, increase



Left Karen Mullins, HomeAway's global marketing director; Above Dr Geraint Evans, international marketer and academic researcher

ly, I think we are reductionists, because if you're not clear-sighted, then you're not doing a good job. The skill sets we need to cultivate need to be fit for that purpose," insists Joe Clift, head of marketing (EMEA) at the CFA Institute.

Michelle Carvill, author and founder of Carvill Creative, adds: "We should still be clear on the marketers' strategic role. Where we go wrong is we say: 'Yes, let's dive into the next new thing, because that's what we should be doing.' But the marketer's role should be to assess that channel and ask if it is strategically aligned to the business's overall objectives."

It is certainly a benefit of the increasingly data-driven culture in which marketers find themselves that, in some cases, it is easier to bring strategic thinking to life for the leadership: "You might get senior marketers asking why are we not on this platform or in this channel - everything we do starts with data. If someone says we have to be on this or that channel, the first thing I'll do is a test to measure the hypothesis scientifically," reveals Karen Mullins, global marketing director for HomeAway, an Expedia Group company.

Of course, the caveat 'in some cases' is important. "A lot of organisations think they are data-led," warns Ciaran

WE SHOULD STILL BE CLEAR ON OUR STRATEGIC ROLE

Michelle Carvill, founder and director, Carvill Creative



TECHNICAL SKILLS ARE NEEDED, BUT THE ABILITY TO CREATE A STRATEGY AND ADAPT IT TO DIFFERENT MARKETS IS A CORE SKILL LACKING IN JUNIOR ROLES

Gemma Butler, CIM marketing director



about marketing metrics from a data and predictive analytics background. In a huge swathe of the economy, it is irrelevant because you make a decision now, where the impact isn't felt for another three years."

Carvill pulls no punches about how to lead those discussions: "A lot of marketers don't have the balls to own the conversation and say: 'We're not going there because we've done the analysis and it doesn't align with us.'"

Thomas also identified that the need to answer to marketing trends - the demand for agility or a 'fail-fast' mindset, for example, meant it was unsurprising marketers found themselves pulled in two directions: "There is a tension between the old-school frameworks and today's digital metrics; it's a tension between long- and short-term thinking. The marketer's role is to understand what is driving the 'now' within the context of long-term plans."

Could it be that the changing work environment means marketers really do need to evolve into a different kind of beast? Certainly, the suggestion is that senior marketers need to take stock to be able to move forward.

"This is a personal passion. It feels like we're at a moment where we need to decide what this profession is going to be. What are we looking to skill and train people in? There are so many talented marketers but we're not moving forward," says Dr Geraint Evans, international marketer and academic researcher.

WORKING THE CORE

Distractions from technology and new platforms aren't just impacting how marketing behaves across the organisation, but having a worrying effect on marketers' functional capabilities, too. There is an erosion of core skills, both in long-serving practitioners and in new generations emerging through the ranks.

"We recently launched research with CIM called the 'Digital Marketing Skills Benchmark', where we asked around 5,000 marketers a series of multiple-choice questions across 12 core marketing disciplines, and even the best of the best were getting between 40% and 55%," warns Rogers.

Gemma Butler, CIM marketing director, adds: "Technical skills are needed but, earlier this year, we conducted research with PwC showing that communication, relationship-building skills, and the ability to create a strategy and adapt it to different markets are core

Rogers, marketing director at Target Internet. "For a long time, senior marketers were very driven on goals and conversions; black-and-white on ROI activity, but you don't necessarily get this from all channels."

Mullins concedes that not everything is measurable but that it should demonstrate enough for marketers to carry kudos: "If you were truly about

last-touch only, you would never do TV ads, because you can't measure that 100%. We have cross-channel attribution but it's never going to be perfect."

But for some, hard numbers won't always be the answer. Bryony Thomas, founder of Watertight Marketing, explains: "One of our clients sells tankers, and a typical buying horizon is nine years. It's fascinating that people talk

Attendees

Gemma Butler Marketing director, CIM, formerly at Sony and Xerox

Virgin Media, Tesco, Boots and Whitbread

Michelle Carvill FCIM Founder and director, Carvill Creative. Author of 'Get Social', former marketing director of Made Simple Group

Karen Mullins Global marketing director, HomeAway, formerly of lastminute.com, Opodo, Travelocity

Joe Clift Head of marketing (EMEA), CFA Institute, formerly Lloyds, Visa Europe, MCI, WorldCom

Ciaran Rogers Marketing director at Target Internet. Digital strategist, lecturer and former marketer at FatFace and Liz Earle

Dr Geraint Evans FCIM international marketer, academic researcher and lecturer, former marketer at Odeon Cinemas Group,

Bryony Thomas Speaker and founder of Watertight Marketing. Consultant and former director of marketing for Experian Integrated Marketing

skills that are lacking in junior roles."

Interestingly, Rogers attributes some of the waning skills at high levels to the trend for non-traditional career paths. "In a lot of cases, senior marketers' knowledge of marketing 101 is really quite low. When you ask how people got to where they are today, it's a lot to do with luck and being the most knowledgeable person in the room when they were offered their job."

Contributing to this may be the perception that so-called new media such as social channels are learnable 'on the hoof', and that what practitioners lack in training can be made up for with guile. Thomas suggests: "There's a distraction around younger people who know what buttons to press on social media but don't know what to say or to whom. In many areas, people get distracted by digital skills but they haven't mastered any strategic thinking tools."

Carvill would agree. She even warns that those who think that because they are digital natives, they are somehow naturally adept at least at these channels, fail to realise that there is greater depth to marketing skill: "I work in social media from a strategic perspective, because it's complex and I felt I had an understanding of how to bring strategy to it. But no-one I trained had any focus on strategy."

There was a consensus around the table that more marketers of all levels are 'getting by' more than they should. "If you haven't got those core skills you're going nowhere - or if you are, you'll be found out in the end," Clift warns.

This is never more evident than when marketers are facing down a crisis. Common derogations of marketing suggest that it is little more than the 'colouring-in' department. It is important to remember that marketing is frequently at the sharp end of reputational or even economic crises. Just 'getting by' won't cut it.

Clift explains he has faced this situation more than once and would have been lost without heavy-duty marketing skills behind him: "When the sky fell in at WorldCom on 25 June 2002, a bunch of us stayed and went through it. We rolled up our sleeves to save the business."

"From a brand management point of view, it was deeply influential. From a developmental point of view, it was deeply impactful. You know you can survive and thrive if you've been through something like that."

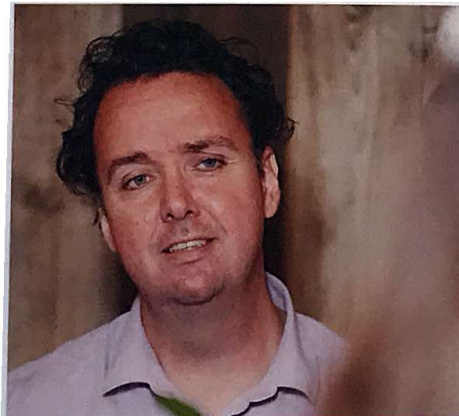
Not all marketers can rely on

WHEN THE SKY FELL IN AT WORLD.COM IN 2002, A BUNCH OF US STAYED AND WENT THROUGH IT. WE ROLLED UP OUR SLEEVES TO SAVE THE BUSINESS

Joe Clift, head of marketing (EMEA), CFA Institute



Below Ciaran Rogers, Target Internet's marketing director



near-catastrophe to hone their skills - nor should they have to. The power of continuous learning is, attendees revealed, both an absolute necessity and worryingly undervalued.

Butler advises that organisations and marketers have to take a proactive approach, both to upskilling themselves and making sure that they bring junior

teams along with them. Not everything can happen in a classroom: "At what point do people lean in and learn from each other? As individuals, we have to take responsibility for ourselves."

It was acknowledged that it can be hard to find time to keep on top of the continuous professional development needed to keep the whole organisation abreast of change, but it is necessary.

Rogers explains: "As a practising marketer, I realise I need a way of getting outside the 'nine-to-five' to learn about the different skill sets. When you're in a particular marketing role, a lot of organisations will say: 'That's not relevant'. But you need to at least know about different skills and understand them."

As with anything, failing to keep on top of tasks means inevitably falling behind on the to-do list. "The risky thing is that people are only just now asking me about search engine optimisation and pay-per-click, and that's terrifying because I want to start asking them about artificial intelligence. I get the sense we're only just getting ourselves right in certain areas but the world is moving quickly," Evans says.

If it were not enough that they have to stay abreast of new developments, senior marketers still face concerns that they are lacking in their own foundations. "The idea is that the more experienced people pass on their skills to those beneath them, but in a lot of cases that transfer doesn't take place because the organisation has become thin in its overall knowledge resource," Rogers adds.

By now, it can seem that there are so many plates to spin that the task of meeting the exacting demands of a marketing leader might seem insurmountable. What is important to recognise is that while senior marketers do need to be across everything to a degree, learning and delegation go hand-in-hand.

MULTITASKING MANIA

Perhaps part of the problem among senior marketers has been the worry that technology appears to be a fundamental part of challenger brands' success; that new skills take precedence over fundamentals. Butler suggests that this is not the case. "As a marketer you need an understanding of everything, but not a working knowledge of applying it."

Mullins, as global head of marketing for HomeAway, notes that her trajectory and that of the company have travelled all these permutations. From start-up to established brand, all the while planted in the disruptive technology space, there



THERE'S A TENSION BETWEEN LONG- AND SHORT-TERM THINKING

Bryony Thomas, speaker and founder, Watertight Marketing

is still a need for the guiding hand of the marketing core that lets specialists do their thing but towards a common goal.

"My role is making sure we have a holistic strategy," she says. "We have dedicated teams for every channel, whether it's TV or media buying, but it's about tying those channels together. In the end they all have the same job, the same message to deliver."

But could it be that by devolving some of the practice away from the core marketer, we once again risk finding ourselves in silo country? Mullins would suggest that de-siloing is more of a state of mind. Specialisms are needed, alongside that unifying philosophy: "You can't really break down the silos but you can create bridges between them."

REBRAND OR REDEFINE?

It makes sense that if the shape of the organisation is changing, the shape of the marketer needs to change, too. This is largely behind the rash of new marketing, customer, product and sales-related job titles, to name but a few.

In one well-reported example, when easyJet's chief customer officer stepped down in January 2018, the role was replaced with chief data officer, because the airline "wanted to exploit the oppor-

tunity of billions of data points". That said, four months later, it also brought back the chief marketing officer role.

But is the expanding set of new roles unhelpful? Attendees suggested that acknowledging change in the marketers' remit is one thing, but trying to rebrand does not solve the issue. "We've played with chief this, that and the other, and we've been ashamed of owning the core values," says Clift, with Thomas adding: "People are afraid of the word 'marketer'. Marketing has a branding issue."

Mullins says: "Marketing has moved from being solely creative to understanding the conversion and the data behind that creativity. If we just embrace that and still call it marketing, we could actually exist as marketers. I don't think people understand that marketers know what drives the business."

The frustration over why the industry feels the need to justify its contribution is clear. When it is responsible for so much that drives a business forward, marketers want to know what it will take for leadership to understand and accept how they contribute. Perhaps the answer lies in the fact that we need to stop categorising challenger brands that are influencing our thinking as digital or technology-led, and acknowledge that in fact they are marketing-led.

"Challenger brands wouldn't make the distinction between business strategy and marketing strategy. Amazon doesn't have this discussion about its marketing strategy," Evans insists, adding: "To move the industry forward we need more consensus [on what it means to be a marketer]. We have been discussing this in a way that I doubt CFOs would. They would never try to make the many distinctions in their roles that marketers do. If we don't have a common definition ourselves, how can others?"

As the discussion ended, there was no easy answer to the dilemma of the ongoing role of marketers. But there is a call for senior practitioners to re-establish their credibility in the role.

This may be through refocusing on their strategic purpose; reinforcing their own fundamental marketing skills as well as demanding them of others; or taking a more pragmatic view of channel and technological innovation. There may well be the need to tackle all three. ◊



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